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SUBJ: Trilateral Water Meeting: Planning to Meet Scarcity

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Trilateral Water Working Group (TWWG) of Israeli and Palestinian water authority managers met in Tel Aviv on June 12, under USG chairing at USG auspices, to review the region's water supply situation. Substandard rainfalls for four years have left natural water sources at record low levels, risking ecological damage to Lake Tiberias and underground aquifers if previous consumption rates continue. PA officials say illegal tapping of resources exists because Palestinian water rights have been ignored, creating a severe shortage, especially in Gaza. Israeli authorities reviewed their own drought conditions and the actions they are taking to address them. Israel believes the PA should undertake more wastewater recycling for agricultural use. The status of several water and wastewater development projects was reviewed. Slow implementation of these projects was attributed to ongoing security concerns and problems in getting supplies into Gaza and the West Bank. GOI officials said that access into PA areas for pipes and other project materials can be arranged, given sufficient information. Both parties agreed that the coming year will need ongoing adjustment to scarcer, costlier water supplies. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) The TWWG meeting June 12 came in a period of flux, amidst press reports of bidding procedures over major new desalination facilities and the airing of several mega-projects proposed to resolve the region's water worries, such as a Red Sea-Dead Sea channel providing both water and electricity. Further, issues of environmental pollution, waste treatment and public health are increasingly allied to the problem of water management. In Gaza, the tension between Hamas and Fatah within the PA started to register in the Palestine Water Authority (PWA), which until now has resisted politicization. A new head of the PWA replacing a veteran of previous negotiations also lent importance to the meeting. While no official transcript is made of TWWG proceedings, post repeats below the memorandum done following the meetings for the information of Washington agencies and posts with interest in the topic.

¶3. (SBU) Begin Memorandum:

Welcome & U.S. Presentation

Introductory remarks by USAID D/Dir David Harden noted the long history of the Working Group, which started in 1996 after the Oslo Peace Accords in 1994. For twelve years the group has met periodically to address both policy and practical questions relating to the sourcing and distribution of water. In recent years the treatment of waste water has become an integral part of TWWG discussions. Harden stressed the importance of maintaining contacts

among professional government managers throughout the changes in political atmosphere. Harden also praised the guidance of Chuck Lawson who has chaired the Working Group over its history, but will shortly be leaving the State Department. All the parties echoed thanks to Lawson for his work. Lawson expressed appreciation to the group for its hard work over a dozen years, and welcomed Dr. Shaddad Attili as the new chairman of the Palestine Water Authority (PWA), replacing Fadel Al-Kawash.

The Situation in Palestinian Areas

Attili described the water situation in PA areas as a drought, now extended for several years. Attili expressed disappointment that 13 years after the Interim Agreement was signed, the Palestinians are receiving no more water than they were in 1995. Under the agreement, both sides agreed that Palestinians have approximately 118 million cubic meters (MCM) a year available to them. According to Attili, that figure has not changed much in the intervening years. The agreement made available an additional 70-80 MCM/year, mostly from the Eastern Aquifer. Attili said that not much of that additional water had been developed. The Israeli team noted that Israel sells approximately 50 MCM/year to the Palestinians in the West Bank. The matter of water rights due to Palestinians has been ignored, Attili believes (though he recognized that that issue is to be addressed in the permanent status water negotiations). The present dire situation presses some people to drill illegal wells, and Attili said this only hurts the PWA as it damages the aquifer. Attili said the Israeli government refuses to grant approvals to dig new wells or to construct new waste water facilities as long as these illegal wells remain open. Attili is committed to closing illegal wells, and asked for Israeli assistance to do this: provision of sufficient water is the only way to suppress illegal drilling.

Regarding Gaza, Attili said that 85 percent of the water distributed exceeds the accepted standards for dissolved nitrates. Tap water is brackish and unhealthy, and the condition of the Gaza aquifer is deteriorating. The lack of fuel and intermittent power supply seriously affects water pumping and waste water operations. Attili said only about 65% of wells are operating, and the volume of water pumped is down 60% from last year's levels due to inadequate power. Attili added that the Hamas takeover in Gaza has vastly complicated the PWA's work. Hamas took over the PWA's Gaza offices about ten days ago, seizing cars and other property, and locking employees out of the office.

Attili also discussed the effluent situation from Ariel that is flowing into Israel and polluting the aquifer both Israel and the PA must draw on. Shaddad stressed the need to work together on wastewater treatment issues. Three of Gaza's wastewater treatment plants are non-functional, with the result that 60,000 cm per day of untreated or poorly treated wastewater are pumped into the Mediterranean from Gaza and 30,000 cm per day from Rafah.

Asked about his "vision" for the PWA, Attili said that the problems he faced were so dire that his vision consisted only of crisis management. He said international donors are providing sufficient funding for projects, but the pressing need of the health of the aquifers is not being adequately addressed. He also cited a critical need to address delays in permitting for wells and other projects that necessitate costly penalty payments to contractors.

Israeli Emergency Action

Israel Water Authority (IWA) Director Dr. Uri Shani began his overview by noting the measures taken by the GOI in its National Water Emergency Plan adopted June 1, 2008. Agricultural users have been cut back by 40 percent, and various demand management policies have gone into effect. He defined the red-line level and black-line levels of Lake Kinneret (Tiberias), previously the major source for Israel's National Water Carrier Mekorot. The red-line is defined as the point beyond which withdrawing water from the source may risk ecological damage to the lake or aquifer. The black-line is the point beyond which such ecological damage could be severe and irreversible. Shani expected Israel to reach the red-line level in Lake Kinneret during July, and he was determined that the black-line level should not be reached.

Shani noted that over half of all water used by Israeli agriculture is treated wastewater -- about 70 percent of the annual wastewater Israel generates. The GOI will invest heavily in the coming five years to build facilities to treat the 80 mcm of Israeli wastewater that is not currently recycled. A NIS 12 billion investment in desalination plants is planned in coming years. Ultimately, desalination will supply two-thirds of Israel's domestic use water.

Responding to the questions of water rights and legal entitlements, Shani observed that the region's natural water is simply decreasing, for a variety of reasons including rainfall patterns and global warming. The reality is that we cannot share what we do not have, so discussion of rights does not solve the problem. Water in the future inevitably will be a more expensive resource, although Shani promised that water allocations made to the PA would not be cut, even under the Emergency Plan measures. This amount the IWA understands to be 118 mcm, plus about another 50 mcm that the PWA is purchasing from Israeli suppliers. Shani said the PWA's recent request for an additional 8 mcm would also be met, but cautioned that the Palestinians have to develop a water recycling capacity.

Joint Water Committee Activities

Attili noted that holding a Joint Water Committee (JWC) meeting was hard to do: he has tried to organize it for several months, but Israeli Civil Administration did not approve. Members of the Israeli delegation responded that political circumstances had at times intervened, making such meetings impossible. The confusion of authority in PWA offices in Gaza at the time of the TWWG is an example. Regarding the implementation of JWC water projects listed at the August 14, 2007 JWC, the parties agreed that a number have been completed, though others remain incomplete due to a political situation that makes entry of construction materials difficult. Joint training in water management (held under the auspices of the Regional Water Data Banks project) was held in Tiberias, Israel, May 25-29; Israeli and Jordanian professionals attended, but due to access problems the Palestinian delegation could not participate. All parties agreed that it was essential to resolve access problems for the training courses to be effective.

The Gaza wastewater situation was reviewed, and all parties agreed it needs to improve. Unreliable power has halted treatment plant operations, although pumping to infiltration ponds continues. With new pipes expected from France by September, the World Bank's North Gaza Emergency Sewage Treatment project will become operational after they are installed.

USAID projects in Beit Jala and Nahal Oz were reviewed. In Beit Jala the first phase is nearing completion, but USAID representatives noted that additional approvals are needed to undertake phase II work. The Israeli Civil Administration has positively reviewed the plans, but no permits have been issued. The Nahal Oz connection to Mekorot was confirmed as still incomplete. While this work was planned and Norwegian assistance funds were programmed for the work, there is no action underway to finish the connection because of security concerns in Gaza. The Palestinian and Israeli teams agreed that a new waste water treatment facility for the Hebron area is a top priority, and they expressed disappointment that the USG had not yet taken on the project again. (Note: the USG had agreed to fund the Hebron waste water treatment project, but the project was put on hold when Hamas took control of the PA in 1996. The funds for the project were subsequently used for other activities. End note.)

The date for the next TWWG meeting was not set; however the consensus was to expect a meeting in six months.
End of TWWG Memorandum.

14. This cable has been drafted jointly by Embassy Tel Aviv and Consulate General Jerusalem.

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